

WASHINGTON, DC – Rep. Mike Honda (D-CA), Ranking Democrat on the Energy Subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Science today questioned the economic rationality of domestic nuclear fuel reprocessing technologies as well as the impact of reprocessing on energy efficiency, nuclear waste management and weapons proliferation. Honda's doubts were raised during the Energy Subcommittee's examination of the Bush Administration's proposed Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) program.

"What troubles me about the GNEP proposal is the haste with which it has been developed," said Honda, "and that a closed circle of people have made all of the key decisions without much input from industry or the scientific community."

Witnesses before the Subcommittee represented a range of viewpoints, several raising similar doubts.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology; nuclear and mechanical engineering professor Neil Todreas testified: "Serious decisions remain unresolved about [GNEP's] pace, including technical readiness, facility processes and scale, and the consequences of redirecting most of the available funding for nuclear energy to this effort."

Dr. Richard Garwin, IBM Fellow Emeritus at the Thomas J. Watson Research Center, testified that, "Many of GNEP's goals and timelines are just unrealistic. Such an enduring program ought to be considered in light of long-term budgets rather than near-year expenditures."

Garwin echoed Rep. Honda's assessment that Administration decisions have been made before essential research has been completed. "GNEP R&D priorities are simply insufficient to make decisions across a wide range of critical areas – from reactor cooling methods to which fuels will power fast-neutron reactors," he said, concluding, "GNEP is an unnecessarily expensive, hastily formulated program, not the deliberative, transparent process critical for success."

Likening the GNEP decision-making process to President Bush's Iraq war planning, Rep. Honda noted, "The Administration's policy decisions have already been made by a closed White House club, ignoring critical facts and shunning outside expert input," he said. "They first make decisions, and then tailor convenient justifications for sale to Congress."

In conclusion, Honda voiced concern about the Department of Energy's (DOE) openness to external advice, noting that reports about the "disbanding of the Secretary of Energy's Advisory Board – which was chartered to provide the Secretary with timely, balanced external advice – only reinforce the impression that outside input is unwelcome on major programs such as GNEP that are critical to America's economy and national security."

The full text of Ranking Member Honda's statement is included below:

Opening Statement of Rep. Mike Honda

Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Energy, Committee on Science

April 6, 2006 Hearing on the proposed Global Nuclear Energy Partnership

I thank Chairwoman Biggert for holding this hearing today so that we can learn more about the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, which President Bush announced without providing much detail in February with his budget request.

As we all know, currently the United States does not reprocess nuclear spent fuel because of concerns about the proliferation of nuclear weapons material.

In addition, reprocessing is not cost effective, since uranium supplies around the world are plentiful and can be fabricated into fuel at far less cost than reprocessing spent fuel. The economics of this situation have not changed and are not going to change for a long time.

Which brings us to the real reason that the Bush Administration is putting forward a nuclear fuel reprocessing program – the problem of dealing with nuclear waste.

The politics of Yucca Mountain have made it clear that siting and licensing a second waste repository is highly unlikely. At this point, it still isn't clear how things are going to proceed with Yucca Mountain.

The Bush Administration has seized upon this political situation to justify reprocessing of spent fuel to reduce the heat of the material that would potentially be put in Yucca Mountain in order to expand the capacity of the proposed repository.

Yesterday the Administration sent a legislative proposal to Congress to expedite the repository which would lift the current statutory limit on the amount of waste that could be stored there. Such a move is essential to justifying developing a reprocessing program.

What troubles me about this whole Global Nuclear Energy Partnership proposal is the haste with which it seems to have been developed and the fact that a very small number of people seem to have made all of the key decisions without much input from industry or the scientific community.

For example, it appears that the technology for reprocessing spent fuel, UREX+, has already been selected by the advocates for the program. While the final decision hasn't been made, it seems that the decision has essentially been made to use metal fuel, which would require the construction of a pyroprocessing plant for each fast reactor that will be used to convert reprocessed fuel into electricity.

What isn't clear to me is who made these decisions, what process was used to make those

decisions, or even why they have already been made, given the premature stage of the technologies and huge uncertainty as to whether they will be successful and cost effective.

The spent nuclear fuel we have now can safely be stored in dry casks for 50 years or more, giving us plenty of time to do more research, more fully evaluate technology alternatives, and have greater engagement from all interested parties in the decision making process.

For a program that may cost as much as hundreds of billions of dollars in taxpayer money, it seems that such study and scrutiny is the least we can do to ensure that the best policy is what is pursued.

From where I sit, the way that the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership has been put together and then proposed looks a lot like the way in which the President took the nation to war in Iraq.

The policy decisions have already been made by a small, isolated group within the Administration without all of the facts and without input from experts from outside their group. Once that decision was made, then a justification for it was developed and sold to Congress.

A story posted on the website of the scientific journal Nature yesterday about the disbanding of the Secretary of Energy's Advisory Board, which was chartered to provide the Secretary with timely, balanced external advice on issues of importance, only reinforces the impression that outside input is not welcome on major programs such as GNEP.

But as with Iraq, there seem to be major uncertainties in GNEP, uncertainties in the technical feasibility, the cost, and uncertainty in the ability of the agency in charge to successfully carry out such a large effort.

I don't believe that it is wise for us to rush to judgment on GNEP as we rushed to war, and I certainly don't want to see the kind of outcome that a rushed decision and incomplete plan are sure to deliver. This decision doesn't need to be made today, we have other means for storing nuclear waste temporarily while we wait for all of the facts.

In closing, Madame Chairwoman, I thank you again for holding this hearing so that we can try to get some answers on how these decisions were made, we can hear some outside thoughts on this proposal, and perhaps hear some alternative options for dealing with the problem.